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Philip Garrison

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Meditation · Philip Garrison

*. . . undertaking once in my life to rid
myself of all the opinions I had adopted.*

—Descartes

TWO VERY DIFFERENT moments characterize the part of my life I spent getting a college education. They manage between them to represent the ups and downs of the thing, the windfalls and pratfalls of book-learning. Or anyway they do so now, examined from a perspective twenty-five years removed in time. Way back there in the early sixties they lurk, a few months apart from each other, quickening all that level Illinois prairie I grew up in. Back and forth across the vague contours of adolescence, they serve as landmarks. Long ago my memory turned them vivid as the towers that string high tension lines across the sagebrush arroyos I live in, nowadays.

It was the autumn of 1960. I was a kid from a little town that, clinging to one limestone bank of the Mississippi River, had been dying for damn near as long as anyone cared to remember. So I'd ridden 120 miles to the site of the neighboring state's university. There I'd enrolled in their famous school of journalism. Already I was worried about my future. I plain couldn't tolerate the thought of factory work, that numbing routine I saw leaving people my age dazed, bewildered with repetition. Unlike the kids I'd gone to high school with, I wasn't going to wind up a spot welder. Not even a fork-lift operator. Me, I was going to write for a living.

That's how it was that I found myself in the university's library carrels, on one warm October night, paging back and forth through an assignment. It felt good. I hunkered down, surrounded by hours of headnotes and footnotes, awash in more implications than any eighteen-year-old could possibly follow. The fellow on the page in front of me happened to be doing the neatest thing I ever saw. He simply sat down in front of a fireplace, cinched up the belt of his dressing gown, and vowed to rid himself of all his opinions. Flames crackling against the Dutch winter at his window, he began right then and there, by doubting it, to blot out the room in which he sat.

My university's library was undergoing a facelift at the time. Apparently somebody had decided that, while they were at it, they might as well attach a couple of annexes to the building too. Anyhow, expansion plans left the whole thing rising, week by week. Wherever I'd sat, the first few times I was there, odors of paint and plaster had lent a temporary, tentative feel to my thoughts. So when the lights, a little after ten, blinked off then on again, I scarcely looked up from my page. Instead, I just sat there, huddled in a little pool of brightness, the marble walls around me engraved with Latin phrases. And then, quite suddenly, I sat in utter dark.

My god! I felt like such a rube. Realizing now too late that I was supposed to leave the first time the lights blinked off, I felt my face flushing. My heart started to pound. I closed my book and crept between the stacks, keeping upright by running my fingertips over the spines of lord only knows how much heavy thinking. Down five flights of stairs I eased, only to find that the big brass front doors were locked. Of course, I figured, there had to be some other way out. Maybe a fire escape. From one floor to another, groping books and barking my shins, I climbed.

What is it, that peculiar clench of mind which we camouflage in a phrase like *to notice*? I only can say that, after half an hour of stumbling around in the dark, I noticed a slight motion to the air. For some reason or other, I froze, mid-stride. Little by little, my eyes made out the shapes of tarps and wheelbarrows. I'd wandered outside, sure enough, onto an unfinished section of roof. And here I stood with one foot in the air, half a step from falling three floors to the parking lot below. Breeze blew the stars a brittle white, overhead. I could feel my breathing getting slower.

Within days I was savoring the absurdity of that night, realizing, little by little, how close I'd come to getting myself killed. Caught up in admiring how a dead Frenchman made the world disappear, I'd nearly stepped right on out of my body! My own powers of delight, by now, were delighting me. Maybe it wasn't all that important to be a journalist. Maybe I really wanted to get into some other line of work, something that would leave me entertaining pretty much whatever thought it was that struck my fancy. Anyhow, no matter what, I wanted not to live like a certain man and woman I knew.

The Mr. and the Mrs. represented pretty nearly everything I wanted to leave behind, back in that factory town. They dwelt in a tiny, ground-

floor apartment, boring each other senseless year after year, their each idea repetitive as the auto exhaust graying their lace curtains. While coal soot and forsythia contended for their windowsill, each despised—with heart and soul—the other’s stolid predictability. She was a nurse. He worked for the railroad. They never, ever should have gotten married to each other. I figured, after all, that I should know: I’d grown up right down the street. They and my parents were friends.

One noon over bologna and canned tomato soup, when the Mrs. called the Mr. an awful dumb bastard, he stood, purple, veined, hissing the word *bitch* at her. Then he sat back and blew on a spoonful of soup.

By the time I was ten I knew they quarreled even when taking their afternoon nap. From way out on the sidewalk I could hear the bedsprings’ antagonism.

Time, it turned out, was starting to be far from kind to them. It must have been during my first year away at school that the Mrs. began to envy the Mr. his trips out of town on railroad business. It didn’t matter that he only went to places exactly like the one she felt was strangling her, other collections of brick and clapboard cluttering the riverbank. She simply couldn’t bear to be left behind. So it was that, one time he came back, something like a clear and distinct idea stretched the Mr., as if he were falling: he learned the Mrs. had been in bed with his buddy the one-armed radio announcer. As if at a branch or awning, the Mr. clutched at her. His fingermarks took days to let go of her throat.

Clear and distinct ideas were what rescued my new hero, René Descartes. They fished him out of a certain isolation that washed about him, the kind of detachment his doubt left lapping the floor and windowsills. Monitoring his own every thought, he decided to hold out for a certain intensity of impression, to wait for some notion so vivid it couldn’t really be doubted. Such an idea would have to be valid, wouldn’t it? On any idea clear and distinct enough, he could proceed to erect opinions that wouldn’t sway and teeter at the least breath of skepticism. How stubbornly he sat there, forcing himself to suppose that his chair and fireplace might be hallucinations, doubting his own existence even, waiting for the world to give him the high sign. I could imagine his relief, the way he must’ve blinked back tears, when the world finally did confirm his existence. My own experience in the library, after all, amounted to just such a signal from the world.

A few months later there occurred the second of the two events that characterized my getting an education. One afternoon I happened to wander into the oldest building on campus. I'm sure every Midwest state university finds some reason to preserve the venerable structure that housed its first classrooms, back in the last century, when the institution was turning out public school teachers. In the case of my alma mater, the building, now old and in need of repair, accommodated a few administrators, a language laboratory, and a couple of faculty offices. Probably I was hunting some professor's mailbox to turn in a paper.

Anyhow I opened a door into a room a hundred feet long, maybe, by fifty in width, the creaky hardwood floor and high ceilings lit only by sunlight slicing through the venetian blinds. It took my eyes a couple of seconds to acclimate. My first impression was of whiteness, countless angles and surfaces of it, bulks and lumps of volume and density, torso and thigh and jawbone and brow. Huge, blind faces turned toward me, or turned away. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't even move. I have no idea how many seconds passed before, as if from a distance, I felt my eyelid twitch, and a drop of sweat trickled down my ribs, and recognition started flickering through me. I'd stumbled into the storage room where the Art History faculty kept their plaster reproductions of classical statuary.

Sure enough there they were, gods and mortals alike, flung into a dark, ignominious corner. That fellow with the discus was the one some professor had said represented, well, not the way men really looked, but rather the way they ought to look. Now that I recognized the huge head of Hera, the winsome, tilted glance of Alexander the Great, I started to fidget, embarrassed somehow at having found them stashed away like this. As if nabbed peeking through a keyhole, something in me writhed with self-consciousness. Wasn't Zeus himself scowling at my clumsiness? And what about that poor guy behind him, the one all tangled up in snakes, what could he be thinking?

In a moment, familiarity snapped back in place. I stepped out, closed the door and continued on my way. But I swear I felt the plaster exuding a certain resentment, a simmering indignation at all this modern neglect, a spiteful animosity at the disregard that had cached them here, out of the way, as curious, isolated fragments of artistic skill. A perfectly understandable rancor, a peevish malice even, radiated off those lovely limbs.

I knew beforehand, of course, that any belief runs the risk of outliving

those who profess it, leaving behind nothing more than a roomful of scorned idols. But the zeal of these particular creatures generated in me a conviction, a notion I can't shake wherever I go, about what kind of interdependence it is that links us to the gods. I can sympathize with all that Olympian pique because my glimpse of them, brief as it was, somehow revealed the slant they have on our lives: they're the jagged edges that detach us from what we know, the sudden boundaries that startle us into a difference from ourselves, as well as the borders at which we meet our own feelings coming back.

I'd never seen plain stone assert itself like that. And I wouldn't again until the morning, twenty years later, when Mt. St. Helens drenched our sky with powdered rock. What started as an average Sunday in May, out here, wound up reminding me of the fierce detachment I felt in those plaster poses. I got up and read awhile, and then went out to run my usual route down a country lane, up a dirt escarpment and into the wind skidding off the south face of the Stewart Range, a hundred miles away. It must've been about eight in the morning. Poplar leaves quivered above the road shoulder. Cheatgrass blew at the edge of the Odd Fellows Cemetery. I really don't know how long it took me to notice that no birds were singing. A couple of Holsteins had stopped grazing, and stared intently toward the west.

I certainly never heard any explosion, anywhere. But after a while a little black cloud knotted up, directly overhead, and began to swell. It spread evenly outward, all directions at once, darkening and thickening, descending like a lid over this bowl-shaped valley. Something funny was happening to the light. Instead of the valley floor getting dark from west to east, as when the sun sets, and shadows lengthen, a peremptory, shadowless gloom was swelling outward, pinching the daylight thinner and thinner. A skinny halo, a fringe of brightness, rimmed the whole valley for an instant. Then we dropped into the deepest dark I've ever seen.

Within hours, we learned to call that stuff slithering through the air *ash*. It kind of tickled, like disembodied fingers brushing against our cheeks and the backs of our hands. Every time we stepped outdoors, it insinuated itself down the necks of our shirts, and over the tops of our shoes. It felt like we were being invaded by something at once soft and gritty, something foreign, but warm like us, a presence that swallowed up

our movement so quickly our porch lights dimmed at a distance of fifty feet. So we kept telling ourselves that it was only rock made powder by the force of an explosion—probably the blast of today. But maybe, we admitted, what was falling on us had lain in the mountain's crater ever since the previous eruption, that even bigger one which still persisted, after a hundred years, in Native American tales. That's what we told each other, over and over, endlessly. Meanwhile I kept recalling my afternoon in the storage room.

The ash felt like it was hinting at the same thing the statues were: a message almost inaudible, like the growl of a dozing dog, an admonition I couldn't quite paraphrase, a caution apparently meant for my ears alone. However often I might blunder onto feelings I could barely recognize, my feelings and I illustrated recurring, earthly limits.

Anyhow, when the sun rose the next morning, what looked like a new fallen snow covered the grass and the tree branches. The heat was suffocating. Back and forth in the ash, wherever we looked, the trails of dying bugs wandered. On our breakfast table, the headlines of papers alluded to vanished loggers. And yet we ourselves had managed to survive. The ash ruined some wheat, and clogged our carburetors. But sparrows shook themselves clean, all that next day, and we bound wet rags to our air intakes. And we and the sparrows say, ten years later, what the hell: it could've been worse. Even now you can find that bone-colored powder in a hollow log, or in the far corner of some closet. But you have to know what you're looking for.

It was because I knew what to look for that I recognized the statues in the first place. The ash that came along later only made me remember having recognized them, although by now it also reminds me that my two moments do keep turning into paradigms. The night in the library, the afternoon in the storage room: for years now both have kept my memory plugging away, arranging other moments around them, other scenes that qualify and define them. My reaction to reading Descartes reached back and clarified, in retrospect, how frantic I was to avoid the kind of adulthood I saw spreading out underfoot. Just as my encounter with so much plaster in human form foreshadowed that shapeless, floating cloud of ash. But each of my two moments manages, as well, to throw into relief whatever it is that the other attracts: the dark which swallowed me up in the

carrels offsets that massive blackness which sprang out of the mountain. And the faces crowded into the storage room—now that I think about it—do seem animated by feelings I first learned to recognize in the Mr. and the Mrs. Maybe they aren't exactly the same feelings. But the zealous and the jealous do amount to counterparts of each other.

I knew even then that the Mrs. and the Mr. had lived together so long that neither—except against the background of the other's constant presence—could imagine so much as a sandwich and cup of soup. It was the mutuality of their contempt that bound them together, afternoons, sweating, straining at each other. René Descartes on the other hand, exciting fellow that he was, worked alone. He began in a room empty of other people, and then proceeded to doubt himself right on out of existence.

But somehow it didn't matter really whether Descartes managed to raise his room—nail by nail, with a perfect, mathematical certainty—right back into place around him. I was learning already, even as I sat in the library, that I myself would never be able to focus my thought like that. I hadn't anywhere I could go to get my mind that far removed, that isolated from whatever duplication of other people I felt in myself. Hell-bent to reach some degree of originality, to fight free of the suffocation I sensed in my own every thought, I felt I had to put some distance between the Mr. and Mrs. and me. But even in the instant I nearly stepped off the library roof, I was learning that getting out of their town was one thing. Prying out of my thinking all the redundancy that they represented was quite another. Even when I stumbled by accident into an empty storage room, my own thought processes left it teeming with preestablished feelings. No, I was going to have to admire Descartes' bare, rigorous room from a certain distance. I was going to be one of those people to whom even powdered stone would take on shapes and start talking.

Cogito, ergo sum, Descartes writes at the very moment he first begins to notice himself thinking. That amounts to the single, undeniable phenomenon of his experience: that there is, after all, a certain experience going on. The rigor with which he conducts the kind of thinking he calls "meditation" betrays a desire, on his part, to apprehend the world in a certain way: he wants to impart to his mind a particular spin of thought, an education that will leave him without a single blind spot, alertness radiating

from him over the whole 360 degrees. After all, he's got his own version of that river town and factory work to escape from. What are his clear and distinct ideas but the moments at which the world nods o.k.?

In the first, giddy years when the children were small, when he himself was working double shifts, the Mr. certainly wouldn't have had time to question his wife's fidelity, let alone to doubt his own existence. When he finally did hear rumors about her, I imagine they must have made him feel as if he were vanishing. He'd always thought that he alone knew certain properties of her body: her breathing and her shivers, while she slept, were like a private vocabulary, the nuances of which he knew better even than she herself did. In the early years of their marriage, he'd even thought he could tell, just by watching her features, what she was dreaming about. Or did he only recall it that way because her feelings repeated themselves so often, nowadays? Wasn't she getting predictable and bland, anymore, as the meals she cooked for this husband that she long ago had decided was bland and predictable?

After a while, as soon as she woke, he'd flinch from her eyes running over him, from what he took to be her obvious disappointment he was still there. Though every once in a while, he thought, he could feel her desperately wanting assurance that she really and truly had hurt him. They must have eyed each other like that for years, neither of them knowing what to look for. The gaze of each left in the other a feel of receding into space, detached as a plaster torso.

Of course I don't know for sure that they ever felt these things. But I do know that, never divorcing, they clung like Descartes to Holy Mother Church, the pain they inflicted on each other becoming, year by year, a devout and geometric demonstration of their faith.

Somehow I keep on stumbling across the Mr. and Mrs.: I've got them stashed in what must be the functional equivalent of memory's storage room. They're always sitting together—her long-legged, with high cheekbones, him all T-shirt and muscle definition. They're staring at that part of the fifties which flickers over a black and white screen a few inches wide: a fellow with shiny hair sings an aria in Italian; bears dance and roller skate; a ventriloquist recoils in mock amazement, because of a voice escaping out of an empty box. Right there in their front room I maintain the Mrs. and Mr., tucked away in a town on the Mississippi, twenty miles or so from all that Huck and Jim and even Mr. Twain himself fled like the scene of a crime.

So those are the two moments that characterized my escape from adolescence. Library and storage room exert a bipolarity that continues, even now, aligning glimpses and scraps of dialogue, composing different vignettes to explain who I am today: a fellow who teaches youngsters to read books, and lives in a house alternately warmed and cooled by tall, stiff towers that shoulder cables across the Great Basin Desert.

I still can feel, flowing between those two points of my leavetaking, the nervous current that powered it: a maddening desire to satisfy whatever grownups it was that I thought ran the world. I meant, in the first instance, only to climb out of a fix that my ardor to please had plunged me into. Instead, I began the solitary process of leaving behind whatever it was my inherited beliefs had told me that I had to be, or ought to want to be. In the second, I wandered into a swarm of beliefs a whole lot older and subtler, and more possessive. Each time, naturally, I figured I'd made a mistake.

I was hunting some idea clear and distinct enough. I figured that, when I found it, merely entertaining it would give me whatever permission it is that working class people always have needed in order to change their lives. I shivered with a certain thin, perpetual hum that lately, deep in middle age, I've started to recognize as plain susceptibility to suggestion. My night on the roof hinted that I could be whatever I wanted, though a lot of what I was likely to want could certainly get me killed. My afternoon with the statues cautioned that, no matter what I wound up choosing, the ways of life I rejected always were going to haunt the edge of my attention, scolding, accusing.

It's strange how long it took me to understand that René Descartes was writing a book. In one sense, I always knew he was. But I had to learn what I was looking for, in order to recognize that, sitting there in his room, he was far from alone. No, he was addressing at least one other person, acknowledging therefore by the fact of speech—not to mention the artifacts of paragraph and chapter—that even he was not self-sufficient. And what have I learned about that transparent presence he was addressing? Only that it left his ideas clear and distinct enough for a kid like me to overhear them, three and a half centuries after he wrote. As soon as I recognized that my need for certainty reproduced his own, I was ready to learn why human limbs needed to turn themselves to marble, and then plaster, and finally ash.